Centennial of Mary Todd Lincoln

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ONE bright March morning, many years ago, a passenger train pulled out of the old Wabash Railroad Station in Springfield, Ill. On the rear platform with others stood a tall, dark, bearded man waving farewell to a crowd of people, his friends and neighbors, to whom he had just feelingly said good-by in a few brief, earnest words.

This great man was Abraham Lincoln. Within the railway car sat Mrs. Lincoln and the three Lincoln boys—Robert, eighteen; Willie, eleven; and Thomas ("Tad"), nine. With them were a number of friends. The joyous party was bound for Washington, where on March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated President of the United States, and the interesting Lincoln family became residents of the Executive Mansion. It was after the reading of his inaugural address and the oath of office—administered by the venerable Chief Justice Taney—that President Lincoln was escorted to the White House, where he received the crowds who pressed in to see and shake hands with the famous "rail-splitter."

During the afternoon Mrs. Lincoln took possession of the White House, and began her eventful life as "First Lady of the Land" and mistress of the Executive Mansion. Dismissing the house steward, she took the direction of household affairs into her own capable hands.

The White House of 1861 was not so large, so elegant, or so convenient as it is now. But it was the same stately, simple, impressive structure, always so dear to the American heart. On both fronts, the grounds then, as now, were laid out with taste. The north front portico reared its classic Ionic columns high above the presidential party of 1861 as they drove into the grounds past the fine statue of Jefferson holding a scroll of the Declaration of Independence in one hand, and in the other a pen, as if he had just finished that immortal instrument and was anticipating the glorious results of its influence.

Unpretentious as the White House is, it was a great change from that modest, well-furnished dwelling in Springfield where Mrs. Lincoln had remained, caring for her children, during the absence of Mr. Lincoln in Washington as United States senator and as congressman. The White House with its fine French furniture, Italian mantels, and sparkling chandeliers in the state apartments, its silver plate, fine linen, complete household equipment and corps of well-trained helpers, was palatial in comparison, and greatly delighted the happy wife of President Lincoln.

It is declared to have been the happiest time in her life, when she stood with her honored husband, assisted by her two sisters, Mrs. Ninian Edwards, daughter-in-law of the governor of Illinois, and Mrs. Baker, and two of her nieces, at the great inaugural reception of 1861, in the White House, which was attended by a large and brilliant company. It is recorded that she was then "a pleasant-looking, elegant-appearing lady, somewhat inclined to stoutness, but withal fine-looking and self-possessed," and that her good taste in dress was noteworthy.

Born Dec. 12, 1818, Mrs. Lincoln was forty-two years of age when she assumed the great responsibilities of "Lady of the White House." Though of a good Kentucky family and the recipient of the best education to be had in her youth, she had not enjoyed the larger social and travel advantages which had been the happy privilege of her popular and charming predecessor, Miss Harriet Lane (later Mrs. Johnston), the beautiful blonde niece of President James Buchanan. Mrs. Lincoln's free and easy, independent Western manners suffered by comparison with the courtly elegance of her regal predecessor. But she was fond of society, hearty and genial, though crude in her ways, and though fond of show she was a womanly woman of quick sympathies and tender emotions.

It is the privilege of all newcomers in the White House to institute some social changes. Mrs. Lincoln substituted formal and informal receptions for the time-honored functions of "state dinners." It was invidiously charged that she did this in the interest of economy—an alleged fault which in these present war-time days would be hailed as a virtue!

Those were war-time days, too; the Civil War broke out in a few weeks after

MARY TODD LINCOLN
Wife of Abraham Lincoln, the Centennial of Whose Birth Occurs on Dec. 12.

Mrs. Lincoln's advent in the White House. The natural gaiety of her disposition brightened the gloom of the succeeding months when mobilization was going on; and during the early dark days of the war—though much criticized for doing so—she held frequent receptions in the White House, as an antidote to war's depressions. Then came the sad, sudden death of her second son, William Wallace Lincoln, a bright, promising boy of twelve years. For two years Mrs. Lincoln's head, with that of the President, was bowed in sorrow and there were no social gaieties in the White House. It is said that she never again entered the "Guest's Room," where "Willie" died, nor the "Green Room," where his body had lain. Her time was given entirely to war relief work, and visiting the hospitals and camps of the soldiers in and about the National Capital. It was with anxious, burdened hearts that Mrs. Lincoln and the President resumed in 1864 the giving of public receptions as a bit of brightness in the darkness of the terrible Civil War, which was then at its climax, but which was ended by the surrender of Lee at Appomattox on April 9, 1865.

A few days after—it was the fateful day of April 14, 1865—when taking an afternoon drive alone with her husband, Mrs. Lincoln, ever solicitous as to his health and feelings, noticed how happy he seemed to be.

"And well may I feel so, Mary," said the President, "for I consider this day the war has come to a close."

Then he added: "We must both be more cheerful in the future; between the war and the loss of our darling Willie, we have been very miserable."

That very evening Mrs. Lincoln saw her husband shot down before her eyes, and the White House became the centrifugal center of a wave of mourning which swept the nation.

During the month following this great national tragedy, Mrs. Lincoln remained secluded in her own apartments in the White House, seeing no one and unable to exercise the needed control over the disordered affairs of the Executive Mansion. During her illness, which made it impossible for her to attend Lincoln's funeral at Springfield, vandals were busy in the White House; many of its ornaments, silverware, and even heavy articles of furniture were carried off, along with souvenirs of the lace curtains and the richly upholstered furniture, from which bits were cut as throngs daily swarmed into the mansion.

It was in May, 1865, that Mrs. Lincoln, a sad figure in black, left the White House forever. She had gone there only four short years before, elate, proud, and immensely happy at achieving the highest social position in America. She left there broken-hearted, crushed with sorrows under whose repeated blows reason tottered and her health was permanently impaired. She was pensioned by Congress, and after twelve years' wanderings in search of health and residing at the home in Chicago of her distinguished son, Robert Todd Lincoln, she died in Springfield in 1882.

Philadelphia.